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AUTHOR DeKock, Anita
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ABSTRACT

Recognizing that global education did not speak with one voice, that global educators could not even always find ways to speak to each other, and that this internal situation made it very confusing for those outside the field, the conference planners brought together a group of global educators to discuss what assumptions and beliefs should underlie public education in a democracy. The participants agreed on six assumptions: (1) Schools should value and cherish children. School should be a place where the dignity of the individual is honored and where norms of behavior would allow students to feel safe and free to think critically and speak and act out of personal conviction. (2) Schools should teach students to value democratic principles and practices. (3) Schools should prepare citizens to make informed decisions and participate effectively in local, state, national, and international communities. This would require that schools teach students thinking skills so they can weigh information and make critical judgments. (4) Schools should teach about others with fairness and evenhandedness. (5) Schools should help students make moral judgments. (6) Both the community and professional educators have unique and complementary roles in designing responsive schools. These six assumptions are discussed, and some of the unresolved issues and remaining questions are enumerated. A list of conference participants and information about the sponsoring agencies conclude the document. (JB)

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Issues in Education:

Quality Global/International Education: What Political Stance?

In this conference summary, the author endeavors to share a number of valuable insights that emerged from the discussion of the appropriate political stance for quality global/international education. This report is not intended as a statement of consensus since there may be numerous views and interpretations mentioned here that were not shared by all who were present.

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Contact:

The Stanley Foundation
420 East Third Street
Muscatine IA 52761
Telephone 319/264-1500

Written by Anita DeKock
Production: Kathy Christensen; also, Margo Schneider

Issues in Education:

Quality Global/ International Education: What Political Stance?

A conference cosponsored by:

AEGIS

Global Educators

Las Palomas de Taos

The Stanley Foundation

April 7-9, 1989
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Global education is a relatively new approach to schooling, about twenty years old. From its beginning, global education has been revolutionary both in its content and in the process or pedagogy advocated by its proponents. The field is far from monolithic; its practitioners have held many points of view and have spoken with many — sometimes contradictory or at least conflicting — voices. In the early days that really was not a problem. Few people took global education or global educators very seriously. If there was divergence within the field, the umbrella of global education was big enough to cover everyone.

Times, however, have changed. Today the global education revolution is moving into the national arena and is being institutionalized — states are adopting global education standards, boards of education are implementing those mandates, and school districts are incorporating global concepts into their curricula. This type of exposure and attention is not without cost. Public scrutiny has magnified the very real differences within the field and brought some global educators and resource centers under attack for materials they produce and the resources they advocate.

As might be expected, global educators have many and varied reactions to the institutionalization of their revolution. As global education becomes more a part of the mainstream of education, some in the field feel the need to find one voice for global education — positions, concepts, statements of agreement — that can be used when speaking to state boards of education, school boards, curriculum directors, and colleagues in the field. Others, however, equally desirous of finding ways and means to speak

to their colleagues, feel no need or desire to reach agreement or consensus on statements of purpose or position. They are comfortable with the vast diversity within their ranks and feel that attempts at consensus deny the reality of the situation and run counter to a basic tenet of global education, appreciating diversity.

Debate and controversy are not new to global education. Controversial issues have always been part of the field. Dealing with the very real political conditions in the world from Central America to the Middle East to issues of development and the environment cannot but raise strong feelings. In many ways teaching about such issues touches the same depth of feeling which exists in society at large concerning these subjects.

In the past the very real differences among global educators concerning how and when controversial issues should be explored in schools have been acknowledged, but there have not been ways to distill these differences. Some global educators believe that without some uniformity in approach within the field, the very opportunity to teach controversial issues, a vital part of global education, may be lost.

It was in this complicated and potentially contentious context that the conference was convened. Recognizing that global education did not speak with one voice, recognizing that global educators could not even always find ways to speak to each other, and recognizing that this internal situation made it very confusing for those outside the field, conference planners brought together a distinguished group of global educators to discuss "Quality Global/International Education: What Political Stance?" The planning group, as well as participants, reflected a broad

spectrum of positions within global education. All participants had long histories in global education, and each cared deeply about this issue in particular and the field in general. This conference was not intended to change people's minds or to develop some strategy in defense of global education, but rather it was intended, if possible, to allow some meeting of the minds or barring that, to delineate those areas of disagreement that seemed ripe for further future discussion.

If measured by the number of statements of consensus achieved, this conference was not particularly successful; if measured by the standard proposed by one participant "to raise issues that engage us in new learning," then it succeeded beyond anyone's reasonable expectations. Although answers were elusive, all agreed that the conference posed the right questions:

—What is meant by political balance, nonpartisanship, and advocacy?

—Should there be any limits on the range of perspectives presented in schools?

—What should be the role of political opinion and advocacy?

—What special responsibilities do global/international education resource organizations have in promoting the study of controversial issues?

—What assumptions and beliefs should underlie public education in a democracy?

Discussion of any one of these questions could easily have taken an entire conference. Because of its overarching nature, participants concluded that the fifth question, What assumptions and beliefs should underlie public education in a

democracy?, was the question they wanted to consider. During discussion of this particular question, the other four questions were addressed. *(Rapporteur's note: Discussions were held in both large and small groups. This report attempts to reflect some of each. Therefore, it should not be assumed that all participants were a part of all discussions or agreed to the exact wording of assumptions as highlighted in this report.)*

As the discussion unfolded two facts were quickly apparent:

1. Agreement is much easier to achieve at a broad, general level. When statements become specific or direct application and practice are considered, consensus is more difficult or impossible.
2. Words are powerful. The group might be in general agreement about the basic idea of a certain assumption or belief; however, when the idea was translated into a specific statement, much disagreement arose over the meaning and/or implication of individual words or phrases.

Assumptions Which Underlie Public Education

Participants began by considering the major players in education and agreed that one assumption underlying public education is: **Schools should value and cherish children.** What would a learning environment where children are valued and cherished be like? It would, according to participants, be a place where the dignity of the individual is honored, where students' self-worth and autonomy are valued. Norms of behavior would make it a place where students feel safe and free to think critically and speak and act out of personal conviction. The atmosphere would cultivate interest and curiosity. In such an environment students are seen as active participants and resources in the learning process with much to offer as

well as to receive. Therefore, in such an environment time is spent finding out what students know and allowing student perspectives on issues to be voiced and considered.

The teacher's role in such a classroom becomes that of guide and co-learner, rather than expert. Ideally, teacher control is released and students become self-directed. Students would be given practical experience in participatory democracy. Participants noted that the practice of democracy should not be, and was not considered, license for chaos. On the contrary, many said that order, discipline, and protection against anarchy are necessary to create an atmosphere where democracy can be practiced.

Many participants suggested that when addressing controversial issues which are inherent in the practice of democracy, a learning environment that valued and cherished learners would focus upon helping students understand and appreciate the complexity of the issue under consideration, rather than upon choosing some side in the public debate. When the purpose and emphasis of studying a controversial subject is to understand the complexity of the issue and not to choose a position to defend, closure becomes much less important. It is alright to not know or to not have all the answers. What is important is openness: openness to a multiplicity of perspectives and to the free exchange of opinions and ideas. The study of a controversial issue should answer many questions and fill gaps in students' understanding, but a thorough study should also raise new questions and leave students wanting to know more.

Unresolved Issues and Remaining Questions

1. Given that most schools are not very

successful at valuing and cherishing students, how should teachers deal with student expectations of a more traditional experience?
2. How does one create an atmosphere of openness in a classroom?
3. What is the relationship between the practice of democracy in a school and the maintenance of order and discipline?
4. Given the current social climate and excessive scrutiny of schools, why would a teacher be motivated to accept this kind of teaching approach?

A second assumption made about public education in a democracy is that: **Schools should teach students to value democratic principles and practices.** Discussion of this assumption revealed many differences within the group. Some thought that shared values were essential in a democracy and thus should be advocated by the schools. Others, however, doubted that shared values could be defined in any way that would be acceptable to all. Still others thought that until the 1960s, society did, indeed, share certain democratic values, but that was no longer the case.

Many agreed that it was easy to accept this assumption on a general level but much more difficult, if not impossible, when one gets specific about what democratic principles and practices will be advocated. Are the Bill of Rights examples of shared principles? Does consensus remain when all Supreme Court interpretations of these rights are included? Not in this group and not in society as a whole either. In addition, many groups in society, e.g., the Ku Klux Klan or the American Nazi Party, do not even share the values of the most basic parts of the Bill of Rights.

The distinction was clearly made between majority values and shared values,

and the risk involved in confusing the difference between the two was duly noted. If schools were to advocate majority values — say those held by 98 percent of the people — what would happen to the fringe positions? Would they be given consideration in schools? It was noted that many ideas once considered on the fringe, integration, for example, are now fully in the mainstream. As one participant asked, "When would the voice of Martin Luther King, Jr. have been heard and given attention by schools under the standard of majority values?" What then should the schools advocate? One participant suggested that schools could advocate the value of a society looking for values that could be shared.

One practitioner noted that such phrases as democratic principles and practices, while very nice, gave the classroom teacher little to go on when choosing materials or curriculum. The discussion made apparent that in a pluralistic society which allows for great diversity, it may be impossible to agree on shared principles and practices. One participant noted the paradox: "One of our shared values is that we don't have to have shared values." Participants agreed that perhaps a more accurate reflection of this assumption about education in a democracy would be: **In spite of the fact that not everyone in US society values democratic principles and practices, nonetheless, the school should teach students to value democratic principles and practices.**

<u>Unresolved Issues and Remaining Questions</u>

1. *What are democratic principles and practices?*
2. *How necessary are shared values in a democracy?*
3. *Do the citizens of the United States have*

shared values? What are they?
4. What degree of agreement is needed for beliefs to be considered shared?
5. When is it appropriate for schools to introduce new interpretations and evolving thought concerning democratic principles, e.g., feminism, desegregation?
6. What is appropriate methodology to teach students to value democratic principles and practices?

A third assumption given consideration is: **Schools should prepare citizens to make informed decisions and participate effectively in local, state, national, and international/transnational communities.** Some discussion centered on definitions of the various communities, but most was directed at the skills needed to make informed decisions. Meeting the goals of this assumption requires schools to teach students thinking skills so they can weigh information and make critical judgments. A large part of making informed decisions and participating effectively means addressing issues of controversy, a very hot issue in global education. It was agreed: teaching controversial issues is difficult to do well. Participants thought that issues of controversy should not be dealt with in isolation but are better addressed as part of a larger unit of study. The question that needs to always be asked is, "Why is this issue being studied?" Most thought the answer should be to help students see the **complexity** of the problem — the number of issues and perspectives involved — not to have students choose a position to support or advocate. In fact that goal, appreciating the issue's complexity, was seen by many as the objective of nonpartisanship.

Included in any discussion of teaching controversial issues is the problem which is frequently characterized as the question of

balance. Is it possible to give students an understanding of all sides and positions in a controversy in an equitable way? How can this be achieved? If it were accomplished, would balance have been achieved? Should teachers strive to achieve balance? Like all issues of controversy, the controversial issue of teaching with balance is very complex, and there are many perspectives — most of which were presented at this conference.

Some say that balance does not exist; each teacher will define a balanced presentation differently depending on his or her own perspective. In addition, it was noted all positions represented in the United States, no matter how divergent, still do not reflect the full range of global perspectives on any given issue.

A specific example illustrates the difficulty in trying to achieve balance. It would be virtually impossible for a teacher to present all the positions on the issue of US policy in Central America. Even defining the subject more narrowly to the issue of aid to the contras would help very little. There are many, many positions on this subject. Participants noted that on this or on any issue the range of positions should not be viewed as a continuum where each point of view is only a slightly more or less extreme version than the position next to it. Each position is discrete. Points of view and positions do not slide together. For example, many groups might be for granting aid to the contras but for very different reasons. And those very different reasons make it impossible to put all the groups favoring aid together as being one position. It was noted that the number of positions on any issue is equal to the number of people involved. Students need to understand not only what groups want or support but also why they have chosen those goals.

If a teacher decided that one way to achieve a balanced approach would be to bring in speakers or materials representing two or three positions, even then it would be difficult to insure that those three positions were presented equitably. There would likely be a great difference in the quality of the speakers or the materials. In summary one participant noted, "I'm not sure what political balance is, but I'm almost sure it doesn't exist."

Others, however, took a different view. They argued that the schools belong to all and that teachers must always make a good faith effort to balance the polarities in discussion of any controversial issue. It was suggested that most often there are two sides or maybe three and that these should be the ones presented. One way to do this would be to present the two major political parties' positions and also the extreme Right and Left positions. Again noting the very personal nature of the question of balance, one participant said, "I'm not sure how to define balance, but I know it when I see it."

Acknowledging that teaching issues of controversy is a part of education in a democracy, what advice could be given to teachers? The task is easier if the teacher has created a classroom atmosphere (as outlined earlier) of openness — openness to multiple perspectives and to openendedness, not knowing all the answers or reaching closure on all issues. Then the emphasis is on understanding the history, complexity, and context of the controversy and examining why advocates hold the positions they do. This goal could conceivably be met by presenting only one position if students were knowledgeable about how to question, analyze, and take apart the assumptions and points of view in that position.

Teachers were encouraged to always note the political element in any issue of controversy. An effort should be made to look for the real interests behind the positions of the various groups and how potential solutions would address these needs. Obviously, the emphasis is on critical examination, not on choosing sides. As one participant stated, "Schools should improve, not replicate, the discussion that is happening in the town square."

Participants were well aware of the need for teachers to have an understanding of the issues so they can guide discussions. However, it was also noted that teachers and resource centers need to acknowledge their own deficiencies. They will not have all the information on all the positions. Participants noted the need to always ask, "What position has not been presented?"

Unresolved Issues and Remaining Questions

1. *How should local, state, national, and international/transnational communities be defined?*
2. *Are there conflicting loyalties from memberships in several communities?*
3. *What is political balance?*
4. *Is balance possible in teaching controversial issues?*
5. *Should achieving balance be an educational goal?*

Another assumption included in preparing students to participate effectively in the various communities of their lives is that: **Schools should teach about others with fairness and evenhandedness.** Evenhandedness and fairness, like balance, are difficult terms to define and even more difficult to apply. Does this assumption mean not being critical of another people's

choices or actions? What happens when the actions of one culture come into conflict with the beliefs and values of another culture? Included are the thorny issues of cultural and moral relativism and moral equivalency. One participant spoke quite clearly on these subjects: Cultural relativism speaks to the fact that culture A has certain values, and culture B has certain values, and one cannot judge culture A by culture B's values. Included are the concepts of respect and tolerance of others, the right of every culture to be accorded the same right to exist.

Unfortunately, cultural relativism can be misunderstood as moral relativism where one culture feels it cannot make a judgment about the actions of another. If that is so, no one could have condemned the holocaust, for example. Many feared that inexperienced teachers especially are quick to say that we are analyzing other cultures, not making judgments. This, however, denies a basic principle of US culture: the ability to determine right and wrong, and thus this approach denies our own morals.

Global educators have often been criticized for not making moral judgments. Critics argue that not making judgments is the same as saying that cultures have moral equivalence regardless of their practices. That is why making a distinction between cultural relativism and moral equivalency is so important. To say that culture A cannot judge culture B by culture A's values is not to say that culture A and culture B share moral equivalency. Left unresolved by this discussion is when is it appropriate, given a belief that cultures have the right to exist and be respected, to make moral judgments in the global community.

Participants next considered the implications of these issues for classroom

teachers. As stated earlier, making no judgment denies a part of our own culture. Critics would say, in fact, that global educators, while quite willing to criticize the United States, have been unwilling to critically examine other cultures. The study of Japan was cited as an example. It is currently very popular to study Japan. But what exactly do students explore? Often Japan is held out as a model and little is said about what appears to Americans to be negative aspects of Japanese society. The choices a culture makes will always have pluses and minuses, and students need to be given an opportunity to examine both. Students, as well as educators, need also to be reminded that culture is a lens that affects how each of us sees everything. Even the distinction between what is positive and negative about a culture depends on one's own culture and perspective.

This discussion reinforced the necessity of giving students the necessary facts, history, and context with which to examine world events. The case of Salman Rushdie was cited as an example. Without an understanding of **why** members of a culture act as they do, the world can easily appear to students as perverse, irrational, and crazy.

<u>Unresolved Issues and Remaining Questions</u>

1. *How does one teach students to distinguish between understanding another culture and condoning all its practices?*
2. *How can one teach students to apply cultural relativism without advocating moral relativism?*

This discussion led naturally to examination of the next assumption about public education in a democracy: **Schools should help students make moral**

judgments. Even those who felt some reluctance at this role realized that it is a role that schools cannot help but play. Teachers will be involved as students consider moral questions and reach conclusions. Additionally, a part of critical thinking, which all supported as a necessary part of teaching, is making judgments.

When the case studies are extreme — genocide, for example — making a judgment may be relatively easy. Determining "appropriate" action based on moral judgment, however, is much more difficult, apartheid being another good example. Both steps become increasingly more difficult when the behavior is not extreme but still conflicts with what one thinks is right, just, or fair. When, then, is it appropriate to make judgments? In the words of one participant, "When the behavior becomes outrageous, it cannot be seen as a quirk of culture where we accept diversity. At that point we must act on our own ethic."

Teachers noted that given the real power they have in the eyes of their students, they are often reluctant to express their own moral judgments for fear of exercising too much influence in their students' thinking. The advice suggested was that teachers model the process that they used to reach their moral judgment rather than simply announcing their judgment. This would give students a pattern to emulate.

If schools are to help students make moral judgments, on what basis should those judgments be made? This question generated much animated discussion. Can the basis be democratic principles or age-old Judeo-Christian beliefs? One participant made distinctions between public, legal judgments — child abuse, murder, stealing; judgments based on democratic principles —

the right for minority opinions to be heard; and religious judgments — prayer in school. Whereas the schools could teach about the first two categories, they should not be involved in the third, religious judgments. There was no consensus on this point.

It was noted that both moralists and secular moralists agree on certain higher, over-arching principles. Are these what students should be taught? Should they be taught 1) to use some external authority, e.g., democratic principles; or 2) to appeal to an internal authority? Is it the realm of the school to teach one or the other or both? Several participants said they hoped students would reach the point of making judgments based upon internal rather than external authority, such as democratic principles. For this to happen schools also need to help students to understand themselves.

<u>Unresolved Issues and Remaining Questions</u>

1. Are public schools limited to teaching an external morality?
2. Should schools teach students what is right and what is wrong or should they teach them a process to use to make their own distinctions between right and wrong?
3. Most moral judgments are not as clear-cut as the holocaust. How should schools deal with moral issues when public opinion is clearly divided?

All of the above-mentioned assumptions place heavy responsibility upon the schools. The final assumption which was discussed dealt with who is responsible for the creation of such desired learning environments. **Both the community and professional educators have unique and complementary roles in designing responsive schools.** Discussion of this

assumption centered mostly around the role of the professional educators, especially as it concerns the teaching of controversial issues. What is the professional educator's role when the community and the educators do not agree on what issues can be taught in schools? Is it the educator's role to acquiesce to the community's wishes? Should the educator attempt to educate the community?

Most participants agreed that educators can be too responsive to the community, not responsive enough, or too responsive to a vocal minority. Some argued that schools belong to the community, and therefore teachers should only teach what the community feels comfortable with. Others saw this as antithetical to the role of teacher. All agreed that conflict will exist and that it is important to maintain good lines of communication.

The difficulties of this situation are compounded by the fact that often teachers do not live in the community in which they teach so they may not be as much a part of developing community attitudes as they once were when teachers lived where they taught. In the best of situations, the community and the professional educators would reach consensus on the overriding goals and principles of education for the community. Shared understanding of what the schools are to be about would go far to diffuse conflicts between the community and professional educators.

Unresolved Issues and Remaining Questions

1. Is it the educator's role to educate the community or to teach what the community wishes taught?
2. Can a teacher be responsive to a community if the teacher is neither a resident or a participant in the community?
3. To what community — immediate

geographic, state, nation, international — should the schools be responsible?

What Was Learned

At the end of the conference, participants again acknowledged that very real differences exist in the ranks of global education and with respect for that diversity, agreed that there is value in further pursuing these questions and differences. They also agreed that the conference's norm of respect had been honored, and as a result participants had heard each other in new ways. The group concluded 1) that this conference was not an end in itself but rather part of a process and 2) that the success of this conference was in part a result of the level of trust and respect achieved, the length of time provided, and expert facilitation. Many voiced the hope that planners of future events to discuss differences would be mindful of these elements. Others noted the need not only to talk to each other but to find ways to talk to the critics of global education. Participants also noted the need to find ways to translate discussions of theory into practical classroom applications.

Conclusion

In many ways this conference mirrored the best in education. An issue of real concern to the learners was explored in an atmosphere of openness and trust. Individuals were treated respectfully and differences of perspective and point of view were honored. It was both frustrating and exhilarating. New information was conveyed; old information was examined in new ways; some questions were answered; but many new questions were raised and left unanswered. The learners were left wanting to know more and wishing that the class wasn't over. Perhaps

more importantly, they left empowered to continue the pursuit of understanding these issues on their own.

One participant summarized the weekend this way, "... Is this not what we want in a classroom? People who have an opportunity to state and examine beliefs ... people who push their learning to gain a wider view of themselves and their world? People who, while challenged, are disposed to carry on. People who know that disagreement and unresolved issues are the seeds of better understanding. People who say 'we can' instead of saying nothing."

For more information about what is being done at the school district, state, or national levels concerning teaching controversial issues in public schools, contact:

John Zola (Re: Boulder Valley School District)
125 S. 34th Street
Boulder, CO 80303

Roger Wangen (Re: State of Minnesota)
Minnesota Department of Education
640 Capitol Square Building
St. Paul, MN 55101

The National Council of Social Studies
3501 Newark Street NW
Washington, DC 20016

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Participants

Facilitators
Jane Boston, President, Global Educators, San Leandro, CA

Robert Freeman, Chairman of the Board, Global Educators, San Leandro, CA

Rapporteur
Anita DeKock, Project Coordinator, The Stanley Foundation, Muscatine, IA

Participants
Mary Apodaca, Colorado Department of Education

Elsie Begler, Director, International Studies Teacher Education Program, San Diego, CA

Bruce Berlin, Director, Trinity Forum for International Security and Conflict Resolution, Santa Fe, NM

Pedro Bermudez, Teacher, Miami (FL) Northwestern High School

Pat Conran, President-Elect, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, VA

Jan Drum, Vice President, The Stanley Foundation, Muscatine, IA

Rita Duarte, Teacher, Ocala Middle School, Alum Rock, CA

Robert Erickson, Director, Global Education Minnesota

Kate Gooch, Director, Tennessee Governor's School

Ronald Herring, Director, Public Programs, Institute for International Studies, Stanford University

Steve Hughes, Co-Director, Program in International and Multicultural Education, California State University-Stanislaus, Turlock, CA

Bruce Koransky, Staff Associate, Center for Teaching International Relations, University of Denver

Susan Martin, World Without War Council, Chicago, IL

Barbara Miller, Staff Associate, Social Studies Consortium, Denver, CO

George Otero, Co-Director, Las Palomas de Taos, Taos, NM

Bob Pickus, President, World Without War Council, Berkeley, CA

Andre Ryerson, Freelance Writer, Amherst, MA

Leonila Serna, Teacher, Taos (NM) Indian School

Mary Soley, Vice President, Foreign Policy Association, Washington, DC

Roger Wangen, Director of International Studies, Minnesota Department of Education

Ruth Wattenburg, American Federation of Teachers, Washington, DC

Pam Wilson, Executive Director, Alliance for Education in Global and International Studies (AEGIS), New York, NY

Stanley Wronski, Professor Emeritus, Michigan State University

Judith Wooster, Director, Stanford Program on International and Crosscultural Education

John Zola, Consultant, Base Line Junior High School, Boulder, CO

Alliance for Education in Global and International Studies (AEGIS)

AEGIS is a consortium of organizations working actively to make quality instruction about the world and its people commonplace for US elementary and secondary students. Established formally in 1988, AEGIS assists and supports forty full and associate member organizations engaged in this effort. Initial priorities of AEGIS include developing guidelines to strengthen the quality and consistency of work in this field and providing opportunities for discussion of critical issues. A founding principle is that quality education requires treatment of complex global/international content from a variety of perspectives in a balanced, non-partisian way.

45 John Street, Suite 1200
New York, NY 10038

Global Educators

Global Educators is a non-profit organization formed in 1985 to translate a set of beliefs about the world and about education into action. Those beliefs are: that we live in a world which is environmentally, politically, socially, economically, and psychologically interconnected and interdependent, and which is characterized by diversity, rapid change, and conflict; that the fundamental democratic processes of our society and government are powerful tools to enable individuals and societies to prosper in such a world; and that critical to the success of those democratic processes is an educational system that portrays the world accurately and that teaches and models concepts, skills, and processes relevant to the nature of the world.

15200 Hesperian Blvd., Suite 101
San Leandro, CA 94578

Las Palomas de Taos

Las Palomas de Taos, a nonprofit educational organization, is centered in the historic Mabel Dodge Luhan house in Taos, New Mexico. This colorful setting at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo mountains hosts a tri-cultural community, providing visitors with unique living and learning experiences.

As an educational center, Las Palomas sponsors a number of diverse learning opportunities, including workshops for educators, art experiences, elderhostels, youth adventure programs, seminars about the Southwest, and retreats. Las Palomas programs help people create positive ways of living with and valuing diversity and change.

Box 3400
Taos, New Mexico 87571

The Stanley Foundation

The Stanley Foundation works toward the goal of a secure peace with freedom and justice. Programs are planned, administered, and funded by the foundation, and all are focused on foreign relations and international education.

The foundation fosters involvement in world affairs through several different avenues, one of which is an extensive educator support program. Building on nearly twenty years of experience in the Muscatine, Iowa, schools, educator support now involves students and educators nationwide and concentrates on global themes through summer workshops, conferences, teaching aids, and program consultation.

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